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AUTHOR Juola, Arvo E.
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ABSTRACT

A third survey of grade trends was made in summer, 1979 to verify whether the slight drop in college grade-point averages (GPAs) detected in 1975 represented a break in the 15-year trend toward higher grades. Responses were received from 180 colleges from a systematic sample of 361 colleges which offer graduate degrees (a 50% return). The results confirmed the slight drop of .02 of a GPA point detected earlier from 1974-1975. This was followed by additional slight decrease in GPA from 1975 to 1976, 1976 to 1977, and essentially no change from 1977 to the fall term of 1978-79. The data certainly suggests a cessation of the 15-year trend toward higher grades but not a regression back toward earlier levels. The total drop in GPA from 1974 to 1978 was but .042 GPA points with no decrease in the last year. This drop is minute in relationship to the .432 GPA point rise from 1960 to 1974. The data also indicate that GPA changes for graduate students resemble those of undergraduates. Over 70% of the respondents reported taking specific action to curb grade inflation, such as: informed dialogue, formal deliberation, research, or dissemination of grading reports: few have changed their grading systems. Although the era of student activism and dramatic social change has passed, new forces such as consumerism, enrollment decline, and instructional innovation, will exert some pressure for higher grades. (Author/CP)

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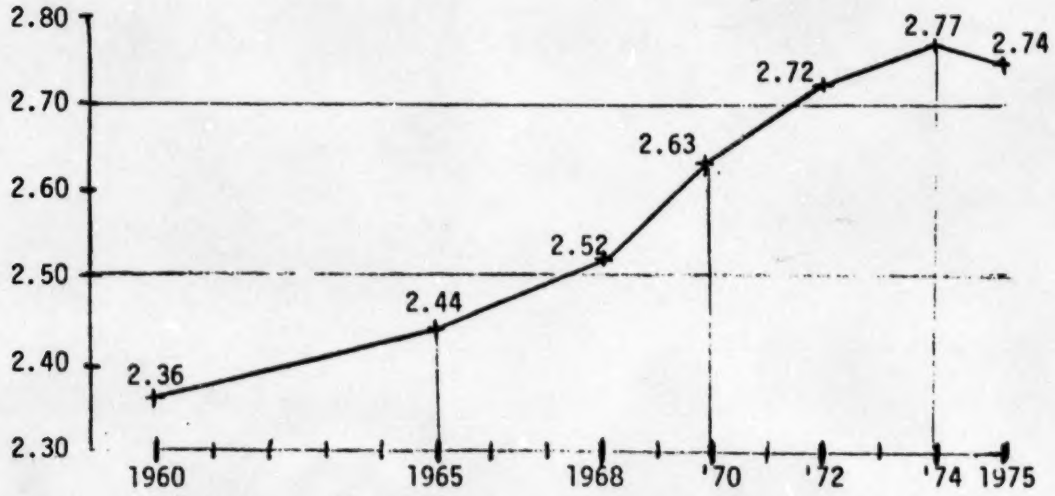
GRADE INFLATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION - 1979
IS IT OVER?

Arvo E. Juola
Learning and Evaluation Service
Michigan State University

Two previous surveys of college grading practices showed unprecidented fluctuations in institutional grade-point averages (GPA's) since the mid - 1960's. The first study which brought national attention to the problem showed responses from 197 colleges in 1974 indicating rising GPA's which began with a "modest" .016 annual rate of GPA increase in the 1960-1965 period.[1] This rose to an "atypically high" .026 annual rate in from 1965-1968 and to "epidemic proportions" of .055 GPA points a year in the 1968-1972. The rate of increase than tapered off to a .028 point increase from 1972-1973 but the total gain was over four-tenths of a GPA point or nearly one half of a letter grade. A second survey of 156 colleges in 1976 revealed a continued although decelerated rise of .024 of a GPA point from 1973-1974, but then, the 1974-1975 showed a -.02 of a GPA point drop.[2] This decrease was the first perceptible sign of a break in the pattern of rising GPA's in a decade and one half. The figure below transforms increments of GPA change for different periods in the two surveys to a GPA trendline. This was done by adding successive increments of change to the 2.44 actual mean GPA computed for reporting colleges in 1965.



[1]Arvo Juola, "Grade Inflation (1960-1973), A preliminary Report," LES Papers on Learning and Teaching, No. 40, Michigan State University, August, 1974.

[2]Arvo Juola, "Grade Inflation---1975; Is It Over?," LES Papers on Learning and Teaching, No. 34, Michigan State University, August, 1976.

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This third survey extends the analysis of grade trends through the first term of the 1978-1979 academic year. The basic purpose was to determine whether the slight drop in GPA in the 1974-1975 period indicates a cessation of the grade inflation trend, reversal of the trend, or only a temporary fluctuation in a rising long-term trend line. Ancillary goals were to probe institutional actions and attitudes to grade inflation, to also include graduate GPAs in the analysis, and to detect alterations, if any, which are being made in grading procedures.

THE PROCEDURE

A questionnaire was mailed in May, 1979 to a systematic sample of 361 colleges which offer graduate degrees.[3] Colleges were to report their average undergraduate GPA for the fall terms in years 1960 and each year from 1964 to 1968. A total of 220 responses were received but only 180 (a 50 percent return) had the sufficient requisite of providing GPA data for two adjacent periods.[4]

The basic method of analysis was to convert institutional GPA's at adjacent periods to an increment of change for each college. When two adjacent periods is a span of more than a single year (as from 1970-74), the increment was divided by the number of years to yield an average annual rate of change. These change increments became the primary unit for analysis of GPA change. Even the reporting of GPA's at successive periods was a process of reconstruction GPA's from units of change from a base year. This process of working with an increment of change from each reporting institution was considered to be more desirable than using a cross-sectional approach of computing average GPA's for different samples of colleges reporting GPA's at different periods. This method avoided, in part, the problem of systematic differences in colleges with incomplete data. All colleges with any change data were included and the unit studied was the average of change increments across colleges.

THE 1970-1978 GPA TRENDS

Table 1 presents the average annual changes for each of the five time spans. The total change over 8 years and that for each of two four year periods also appears to the right. These are presented for the total 180 college sample on the top line. These data are also presented for sub-samples of colleges classified by public versus private, highest degree offered, student enrollment, population of the college metropolitan area, geographic area, and self reported curricular emphasis. Reference to line one for the total college sample illustrates the process. This shows from 114 colleges (for the 1970-74 period) to 170 (for 1976-77) reporting the necessary two base GPA's to compute the five change increments. The average annual change was a positive .037 GPA points increase a year in the 1970-74 period but decrements or a drop in GPA for each of the three annual time spans from 1974 to 1977 and essentially no change from 1977-1978 (rise of .001 points). The total change was a increase of .148 points from 1970 to 1974 and a

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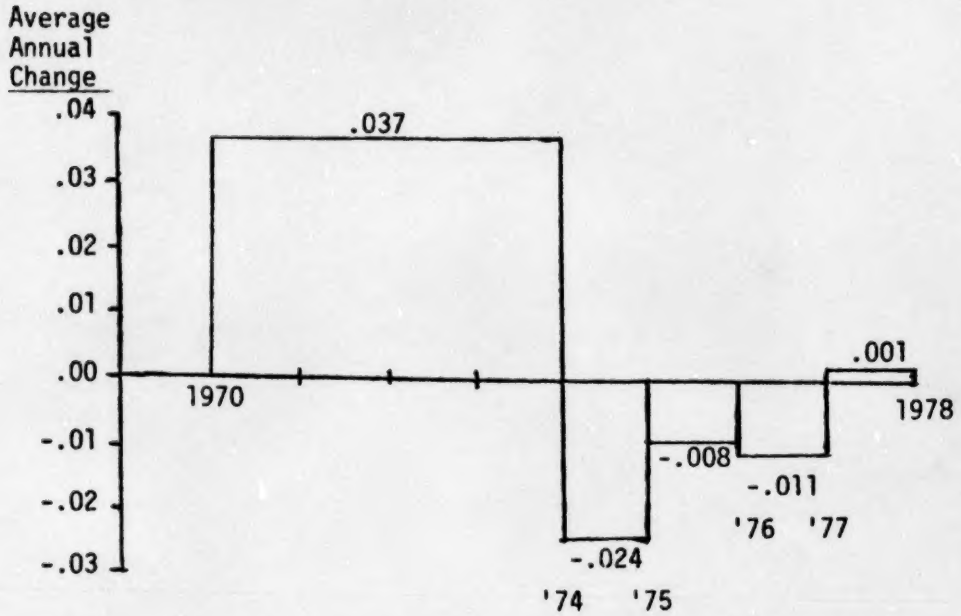
[3]These were selected from the Higher Education Directory of the U.S. Office of Education.

[4]Most of the incomplete returns were unable to provide any institutional GPA's, only a single one, or sporatic ones, or arrived too late for inclusion. The relatively large number of institutions with no data available may be revealing in itself.

drop of -.042 GPA points from 1974-1978 with a net change in GPA from 1970-1978 of a positive .106 points.

The figure below gives a candid image of the relative rate and direction of GPA change since 1970. This figure which presents the average annual change for each period verifies the decrease in GPA observed in the previous survey for



the 1974-1975 period. The substantial annual drop of -.024 GPA points is followed by smaller decreases of -.008 and -.011 points in 1976 and 1977 and essentially no change from 1977-1978. The figures certainly indicate that the long-term inflationary trend line for GPA's has broken. The drop in GPA in 1975 was not an isolated occurence. The data also suggest that the basic movement is not one of a reversal of the inflationary trend or a movement toward deflation. If anything, the additional data from 1975 to 1978 suggest either a cessation of a trend either upward or downward, or possibly a movement upward again perhaps after a pause.

The data for the subclassifications of colleges in Table 1 present essentially the same pattern. Nearly all college classifications showed inflation to 1974, deflation from 1974-1977, and a mixed pattern or little change in 1978. A few college groups such as the smallest colleges and those in the plains area showed the highest total change but these were due largely to the movements in the earliest 1970-1974 period.

The data is also presented in Table 2 as mean GPAs for each of the six time periods. The GPA's for 1978 are mean GPA's for reporting colleges. Those for earlier periods use the change increments from Table 1 to derive GPA's for the earlier years from the 1978 base year. These enable those who work with GPA's to visualize the GPA change data in reference to actual institutional mean GPAs. It is interesting that the derived GPA's here for all colleges using the increment metho

is within .02 of a GPA point of the GPA's reported earlier for the same years in the figure presenting GPA's from the two earlier surveys on page 1. This occurred despite the use of three different samples of colleges and despite different base years being used in computation of the derived GPA's from increments of change. The data in Table 2 are useful for comparing relative GPA's from diverse classifications of colleges. While there are some differences among the college groups, the similarity among average GPA of the diverse college groups is even more striking.

THE 1960 TO 1978 TREMDS FROM THE THREE SURVEYS

Table 3 presents total GPA changes from the three separate surveys in 1974, 1976, and 1979 to yield a composite image of the GPA inflationary cycle from 1960 to 1974 and the slight drop to 1978. Total figures at the right for all colleges show the increase in GPA from 1960 to 1974 to be .432 GPA points. The fall in GPA from 1974-1978 is -.042 yielding a total change in GPA of .390 points even after the four years of deceleration. Clearly, the recent fall in GPA is minute in comparison to the 14 years of rising GPA's observed in the time span studied.

The intervals at the left (called critical periods) seem to fit logical time spans. The .08 of a point rise in the 1960-65 period appears to be a consistent increase but one which falls with normal fluctuations in GPA's over a long-term period. Analysis of local institutional data suggest this possibly being an adjustment upward from the rather conspicuous drop in GPA following the post-sputnik reaction in 1957. The 1965-1968 period with the .078 rise in mean GPA is what I would call the base building period with the rise of the student activist movements, start of anti-Vietnam protests, growing anti-institutional feelings, etc. The climax, however, seemed to come with the .222 GPA increase in the 1968-1972 period which seem the height of the anti-war protests on campus, activist groups trying to merge their efforts with the protest, and divergent faculty members offering solutions such as unstructured class styles, contemporary and intangible class content to meet apparent student demands, a generally anti-traditional attitude as toward grades, evaluation, elitism, etc., and colleges willing to consider intuitive decisions or at least tolerance to "quiet down" a restive student body in an emotional period. Finally, the .052 GPA movement in the 1972-1974 period appears to be a "tapering down" phase with possible growing reactions to anti-institutional actions. This then seemed to set the stage for the -.042 drop in GPA in the 1974-1978 period.

TREND IN GRADUATE GPA's

Colleges in the 1979 survey were also asked for average GPA's assigned to graduate students in 1965, 1970, 1975, and 1978. A total of 108 colleges were able to provide some of the GPA's although the numbers ranged from 28 (for 1965) to 104 (for 1978). These GPA's were converted to differences to yield change increments for each college and increments averaged across colleges to yield

an average change. Table 4 below presents the mean GPA changes along with mean GPA's for each of the reporting periods.

Table 4

Graduate Student GPA Change and GPA's From 1965-1978 Compared To Those of Undergraduates

	Graduate Students	Undergraduate Students
Average Differences		
1965-1970	.150	.181
1970-1975	.100	.122
1975-1978	.001	-.018
Total - 1965-1978	.251	.310
Average GPAs		
1965	3.25	2.44
1970	3.39	2.61
1975	3.49	2.74
1978	3.48	2.72

The data show that graduate GPA's have also followed the same inflationary cycle. The largest increase of .150 GPA points is for the 1965-1970 period. This is followed by a smaller .100 increase from 1970-1975 and essentially no increase from 1975 to 1978. The total increase is about one-quarter of a GPA point for the limited time period covered.

The GPA change increments are some what lower than those for undergraduate students which are presented for reference at the right. One possible reason for the apparent moderation is evident when the graduate mean GPA's in the table are compared to those for undergraduates. Graduate GPA's are conspicuously higher by approximately three-quarters of a grade level at each time period. They are therefore approaching the upper bound of the 0.0-4.0 GPA scale and would logically be depressed because of a ceiling effect. It seems reasonable to conclude that graduate GPA's have been equally affected by the grade inflation trend.

INSTITUTIONAL ACTIONS AND ATTITUDES

One page of the three page survey form asked the respondents to indicate whether specified actions had occurred at their institution in response to grade inflation. The actions below were accompanied by a two-line elaboration giving an added referent to the meaning of the actions listed. Responses to be checked were yes - uncertain - no. The percentages of institutions indicating each response are as follows for three categories of actions based an indicated usage.

	Yes	Uncertain	No
Frequent Actions			
Dialogue (informal)	95	3	2
Deliberation(formal)	73	10	17
Study	72	10	17
Dissemination (of grading reports)	84	5	11
Some Action			
Expressed concern (official resolutions)	43	13	44
Departmental actions (teaching unit level)	35	49	17
Administrative Action	40	15	45
Identification of Individuals (grading records)	43	10	47
Monitoring of grades (individuals or groups)	40	26	34
Little Action			
Individual confrontation (by administrators)	17	32	51
Institutional rules changed (because of high grades)	24	7	69
Change in grading system	26	3	71

These figures certainly attest to institutions having become concerned about rising grades. A large majority of institutions (over 70 percent) indicate the presence of dialogue, formal deliberation, studies of grades, and dissemination of grade trend data to faculty. Less universal but followed by a sizable proportion of colleges are indicated actions such as resolutions or statements of concern, both departmental and/or central administrative expressions of concern, monitoring of grades and distribution of grading records with individuals identified. Only a minority of institutions indicated actions such as individual confrontation, changes in rules and regulations, or changes in the grading system.

Yet, even the actions in the "Little Action" category are quite noteworthy however. While "only 26 percent" indicate yes to changes in Grading System, the pattern of change is revealing and conspicuous. Approximately 30 of the 180 reporting colleges indicated a move to grading systems with more units than the traditional five-point letter grade system. The most common extension is that of adding plus and/or minus to letter grading. This is a sizable proportion of the colleges which are reporting such a major change. Furthermore, this is in sharp contrast to the initial reactions from the first 1974 survey where changes were made toward fewer grading units rather than more. Trends seem to be toward trying to make grades more rather than less definitive.

These tabulations and open-ended written responses from the request for additional elaboration on actions taken and on the current institutional attitude toward grade inflation suggest a growing concern about the possible deteriorating value of the letter grade and what it signifies. Nearly all colleges seem to indicate a need for surveillance and many now note the cessation of the rising trend in grades. Additional actions cited by different colleges also include tightening of policies on drops, repeats, withdrawals, honors designation levels, limiting pass-fail options, a revised incomplete grade policy, revision of standards for probation and dismissal, and stricter enforcement of existing rules. Most of these moves tend to strenghten the use of grades as summative assessment in one of its roles in helping maintain academic standards.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The data presented in this third national survey studying GPA trends in higher education do suggest that the decade and a half of grade inflation is finally over. The drop in GPA reported previously in 1975 was confirmed and is followed by an additional three years of no further increase. The data also show graduate student GPAs to have followed essentially the same pattern as those for undergraduate students. While the magnitude of rise was slightly lower. This appears to be more a function of a ceiling effect because graduate GPA's tend to be about three-quarters of a letter grade higher.

The attitude of colleges toward the issue appears to be one of awareness, concern, and willingness to study and discuss the problems. Prior to 1974, the time of the first survey, many colleges with high grade inflation rates were not even aware of the trend. The attitude now appears to be one of serious concern but not alarm and an awareness that the major crisis period appears to be over. Nearly all appear to consider grades as important and the current institutional trend now appears to be toward more of an emphasis on grades rather than less. Changes in grading systems preiously showed a tendency to move from four and five point to two-point pass-fail grading systems in 1974, a movement back to traditional multi-point systems in 1976, and a continuation of a new trend toward adopting grading systems with up to 10, 15, and even 40 points in 1979. The most common type of revision is to add a plus and/or minus to traditional letter grades.

The original forces initiating and sustaining the period of grade inflation also appear to be over. We no longer have the "harsh" standards of the post-Sputnik period to set the stage; student activist movements are less popular; there are no Vietnam war demonstrations; it is no longer as popular for either students or faculty to be conspicuously anti-institutional or highly divergent; the period of dramatic societal change from new laws and court decisions has quieted down and adjustments appear to have been made. Perhaps most important, institutions now appear willing to question new proposals and proposed innovations and to make studies rather than drift with the emotional climate. They now appear willing to secure and provide data and help faculty make more rational grading decisions.

This does not imply that all problems with negative influences on grading patterns have been resolved. New forces include projected decreases in college enrollments and the relationship of grades to problems in recruitment and retention. There is a growing concern for "consumerism" in both instruction and evaluation and tendencies by some to becoming non-critical in adapting to student preferences. There is a growing concern and support for improved quality of instruction, teaching, and instructional evaluation, but confounded by limited interpretations by influential groups which tend to regard good teaching as near synonymous with positive student feelings alone. A variety of evaluation procedures associated with new instructional procedures are often incompatible with multi-level grading systems and there is a temptation by the users to move toward "A versus F" rather more logical "pass versus fail" alternatives. These include highly productive approaches such as programmed learning, auto-tutorial self-paced modules and classes, contract learning, objectives-based instruction and other programs which use mastery type standards and systems which allow students to retake tests and learning modules until they pass. A recent growing claim by some is that "better teaching" should necessarily result in higher grades, implying that grades should reflect instructor accomplishments rather than student efforts or accomplishments.

However it is reassuring to see colleges critically considering and evaluating factors influencing grades and grading standards. There certainly seems to be a need for these local studies as well as broader based studies such as the one reported here. The purpose is to show what is happening in an area that many consider valuable. The purpose is not necessarily to preserve the meaning and importance of grades although this could be a worthwhile outcome. The rise in grades may also be a symptom of even more basic adaptations that colleges have inadvertently made in the very emotional anti-war and student protest era of the late 1960's and early 1970's. It is also informational and probably no coincidence that the widely publicized "SAT Test Score Drop" also began about the same mid-1960 period. Incidently, this test score decline was not restricted to aptitude tests but also includes state-wide proficiency testing programs and even the college-level Graduate Record Examinations. It certainly seems worthwhile to note and chart conspicuous changes such as these and to alert institutions and groups to what is accurring. What is done should be a product of serious informed deliberation, but a first step is alert affected groups to the issues.

Table I

GPA CHANGES FOR UNDERGRADUATES IN COLLEGIATE INSTITUTIONS
FOR FALL TERMS, 1970 to 1978*

	Range of NS for the five Periods	Average Annual Chg by Period					Total Change		
		1970-74	1974-75	1975-76	1976-77	1977-78	1970-74	1974-78	1970-78
All Colleges	114-170	.037	-.024	-.008	-.011	.001	.148	-.042	.106
Public vs Private									
Public	100-153	.038	-.026	-.010	-.011	.000	.150	-.047	.103
Private	17-24	.033	-.004	-.002	-.016	.014	.133	-.008	.127
Highest Degree									
Ph. D.	78-100	.035	-.021	-.009	-.013	.004	.139	-.039	.100
MA	38-73	.042	-.028	-.006	-.010	-.002	.170	-.046	.124
College Size									
1-5,000	12-20	.061	-.040	.007	-.012	-.003	.243	-.048	.195
5-10,000	43-77	.036	-.027	-.017	-.014	.007	.145	-.051	.094
10-20,000	37-51	.032	-.005	-.006	-.004	.000	.128	-.015	.113
over 20,000	24-30	.033	-.035	-.002	-.019	-.007	.132	-.063	.069
Metropolitan Area									
50,000 or less	43-65	.038	-.019	-.006	-.019	-.003	.152	-.047	.105
50,001-500,000	34-52	.043	-.034	-.008	-.004	.001	.171	-.045	.126
500,001-1 million	17-25	.042	-.032	-.014	.003	.023	.167	-.020	.147
1-2 million	11-16	.018	-.011	-.003	-.020	-.022	.073	-.056	.016
Over 2 million	11-18	.027	-.010	-.014	-.020	.011	.107	-.033	.074
Geographic Area									
Northeast	23-37	.038	-.010	-.008	-.024	.001	.151	-.041	.110
Atlantic	15-20	.026	-.026	-.010	-.026	-.003	.104	-.065	.039
South Central	7-16	.035	-.028	-.008	-.019	.021	.139	-.034	.105
North Central	33-47	.030	-.019	.000	-.010	.006	.122	-.023	.099
Plains	15-23	.058	-.036	-.003	-.002	.004	.232	-.037	.195
Rocky Mountains	8-13	.057	-.051	-.042	.019	-.024	.229	-.098	.131
West	16-23	.029	-.026	-.015	-.003	-.008	.117	-.052	.065
Curricular Emphasis									
Liberal Arts	29-45	.037	-.024	.001	-.020	-.004	.148	-.047	.101
Business	4-9	.030	-.014	-.004	-.028	.018	.118	-.028	.090
Education	3-4	.025	-.040	-.012	-.002	-.022	.100	-.076	.024
Science or Technical	7-11	.042	-.012	-.014	-.004	-.008	.167	-.038	.128
Balanced	71-105	.037	-.025	-.012	-.006	.004	.147	-.039	.108
Total Sample Sizes by Time Period	114-170	114	152	162	170	158			

*Average of changes computed separately for each college.

Table 2

MEAN FALL TERM GPA's FOR SIX YEARS*
(Using Average Increments with 1978 as Base Year)*

	1970	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978
All Colleges	2.614	2.762	2.738	2.730	2.719	2.720
Public vs Private						
Public	2.602	2.752	2.726	2.716	2.705	2.705
Private	2.613	2.746	2.742	2.840	2.824	2.838
Highest Degree						
Ph. D.	2.527	2.666	2.745	2.736	2.723	2.727
MA	2.591	2.761	2.733	2.727	2.717	2.715
College Size						
1-5,000	2.573	2.816	2.776	2.783	2.771	2.768
5-10,000	2.634	2.779	2.752	2.735	2.721	2.728
10-20,000	2.557	2.685	2.680	2.674	2.670	2.670
over 20,000	2.674	2.806	2.771	2.769	2.750	2.743
Metropolitan Area						
50,000 or less	2.580	2.732	2.713	2.707	2.688	2.685
50,001-300,000	2.609	2.780	2.746	2.738	2.734	2.735
300,001-1 million	2.611	2.778	2.745	2.732	2.735	2.758
1-2 million	2.761	2.834	2.824	2.810	2.790	2.801
over 2 million	2.726	2.733	2.723	2.709	2.689	2.700
Geographic Area						
Northeast	2.618	2.769	2.759	2.751	2.727	2.728
Atlantic	2.654	2.758	2.732	2.722	2.696	2.693
South Central	2.489	2.628	2.600	2.592	2.573	2.594
North Central	2.639	2.761	2.742	2.741	2.732	2.738
Plains	2.534	2.766	2.730	2.727	2.725	2.729
Rocky Mts.	2.526	2.755	2.704	2.662	2.681	2.657
West Coast	2.726	2.843	2.817	2.802	2.799	2.791
Curriculum Emphasis						
Liberal Arts	2.649	2.797	2.772	2.774	2.754	2.750
Business	2.637	2.755	2.741	2.737	2.709	2.727
Education	2.606	2.706	2.666	2.654	2.652	2.630
Science or Technical	2.539	2.706	2.694	2.680	2.676	2.668
Balanced	2.608	2.755	2.730	2.718	2.712	2.716

*The 1978 GPA is the average of GPA's reported for each group. The other five GPA's are computed by subtracting the change increment (in Table 1) from the 1978 base year

Table 3

TOTAL GPA CHANGES SINCE 1960 FROM THREE SURVEYS

	Change By Critical Periods					Total Rise and Fall		
	1960-65	1965-68	1968-72	1972-74	1974-78	1960-74	1974-78	1960-78
All Colleges	.080	.078	.222	.052	-.042	.482	-.042	.390
Public vs Private								
Public	.069	.074	.237	.049	-.047	.429	-.047	.387
Private	.115	.075	.173	.063	-.008	.426	-.008	.418
Highest Degree								
Ph. D.	.090	.075	.234	.042	-.039	.441	-.039	.402
MA	.075	.078	.205	.065	-.046	.423	-.046	.377
College Size								
1-5,000	.070	.054	.207	.072	-.048	.403	-.048	.355
5-10,000	.060	.060	.241	.060	-.051	.421	-.051	.370
10-20,000	.125	.120	.202	.041	-.015	.488	-.015	.473
over 20,000	.065	.075	.231	.033	-.063	.404	-.063	.341
Metropolitan Area								
50,000 or less	.070	.084	.217	.069	-.047	.440	-.047	.393
50,001-500,000	.065	.072	.216	.044	-.045	.397	-.045	.352
500,001-1 million	.060	.079	.245	.051	-.020	.434	-.020	.414
1-2 million	.160	.069	.217	.057	-.056	.503	-.056	.447
Over 2 million	.135	.105	.243	.009	-.033	.492	-.033	.459
Geographic Area								
Northeast	.085	.090	.226	.031	-.041	.432	-.041	.391
Atlantic	.135	.060	.218	.081	-.065	.494	-.065	.429
South Central	.125	.060	.145	.108	-.034	.438	-.034	.404
North Central	.095	.117	.166	.065	-.023	.443	-.023	.420
Plains	.060	.051	.274	.039	-.037	.424	-.037	.407
Rocky Mts.	.020	.072	.263	.057	-.098	.412	-.098	.314
West	.050	.078	.270	.039	-.052	.437	-.052	.385
Curricular Emphasis								
Liberal Arts	.125	.084	.196	.070	-.047	.475	-.047	.428
Balanced	.080	.081	.203	.049	-.039	.413	-.039	.374